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## Pick Your Poison: Fall Down a Flight of Stairs or Have your Qualifications Questioned

Aubrey Hampton  
*Utah State University*

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Utah State University

Pick Your Poison: Fall Down a Flight of Stairs or Have your Qualifications Questioned

Aubrey Hampton

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Susan Anderson

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**Abstract**

In the writing center, self-confidence is essential. Students respect and trust the advice of a tutor who can exhibit confidence in themselves. Self-confidence in tutoring can be derived from personal experience as well as from observations of the methods of other fellow tutors. Peer observations provide an opportunity for tutors to learn additional skills, and to gain confidence in themselves.

*Keywords:* Peer observations, Tutor education, Confidence, Tutor Confidence, Trust

## Pick Your Poison: Fall Down a Flight of Stairs or Have your Qualifications Questioned

I can clearly recall the nervous energy that raced through my body during my first week working at the writing center. The newness of everything and my perceived inexperience seemed to loom over me. I was working with unfamiliar programs in a new position that took place in an entirely online environment. Leading up to my first week, my type A personality kicked into full drive and I spent hours watching tutorials and reading (and rereading) any tutoring guides I could get my hands on. It was a steep learning curve, and I felt alone during the process. The online format was isolating and lacked an important aspect of learning: watching and listening to my fellow tutors as they worked in order to experience a real time application of the teaching strategies and techniques that I had read about.

When my first appointment rolled around, I felt nervous but optimistic. I was looking forward to interacting with students and helping them improve their writing. Discussions with students were one of my favorite things about tutoring, and one of the things I missed the most in the era of COVID. I had prepared for every meeting that day, leaving notes of encouragement along with constructive criticism on each individual's document. With my cherry-printed notepad of neatly printed comments and discussion points for students lying next to my laptop, I was ready to take on my first set of tutoring sessions. Imagine my surprise when at the end of what I thought was a "productive meeting" a student looked at me through the grainy camera of our zoom meeting, seeming to size me up, and frankly asked me, "So what *really* makes you qualified to be a writing center tutor?"

Shit.

That definitely wasn't in my notes.

Needless to say, I was entirely taken aback by this student's bold comment. I admired her forthright nature but was also chagrined that she felt that our meeting amounted to so little as to end it with a comment entirely undercutting the effort that I had spent preparing for it. In that moment of hesitation, my insecurities screamed at me that I didn't have a certificate or plaque to commemorate my qualifications or any source of proof of my personal experience that had led me to obtain this position in the first place. After a pause I answered, "Well, I passed the training, I really enjoy writing, and have had practice helping others with their writing years before I took this job." This student simply nodded once, leaving me wondering if she actually believed me, or if she would leave still thinking I was unqualified to help students in my job. I completed the final requirements for our meeting, and we parted ways.

That student interaction left me feeling worse than the time I fell down an entire flight of stairs in the business building. Despite being two completely different situations, the recovery process was startlingly similar: hide the fact that you want to cry out of sheer embarrassment, pick yourself up as quickly as possible and run to your dorm where you can cry in the privacy of your own home. That night I sat in my room mulling over our meeting, replaying our conversation over and over in my head, trying to understand where it went so wrong. I felt that I had provided her with an equal amount of critical and positive feedback and that we had a good discussion regarding her writing, but she had still felt that my advice and insight wasn't enough to amount to my position. I reasoned that it was also completely plausible that this student was just asking out of personal interest. She was a talented writer and maybe she was interested in applying to work at the writing center herself? The truth is, I will never really know what

thoughts were going through her head when she asked me that simple question. I doubt she knew the confidence-crippling affect her comment had just dosed me with, nor intended for me to take it so personally. I ultimately came to the conclusion that regardless of the motives behind that student's comment, my reaction was proof of my largest flaw as a tutor: my unsteady confidence in my ability to be helpful to students. The only way students would respect and trust my guidance was if I first exhibited trust and confidence in myself.

One of the greatest pieces of advice I ever received regarding tutoring was to trust my intuition. It was empowering. Being told that my instincts and feelings were valid and were an asset for me to utilize, made me feel like I really was equipped to help students. We, as tutors, need to realize that our natural instincts are directed from years of experience and should be given their rightful value. Hunter E. Henrichsen, a tutor at Utah State University, explores this idea stating, "One reason that tutors, especially inexperienced tutors, would deny their intuition is the concept of 'okay' or 'right' in a session" (3). Humans are creatures of habit, and even tutors strive to find a system or schedule for tutoring sessions. It might go something like this: Introduce yourself, smile, outline the appointment, address the student's primary concerns, wrap up and complete appointment. But what if a topic trails off from the pre-planned outline and takes up more of the meeting? Can we trust ourselves enough to sense what will be the most valuable for students, even if it means veering from the comfort of our outline, to teach in the moment? As individuals we have each had unique experiences that have contributed to our perspectives and methods of tutoring. We need to have the confidence to trust in this experience to guide our tutoring sessions. Because such experiences vary dramatically from tutor to tutor, I believe that peer observation is a fantastic way to additionally build up confidence in tutoring.

Peer observation is an incredibly valuable asset to new and experienced tutors alike. Due to each tutor's distinct life experience, each has their own particular styles, methods and systems to facilitate an effective tutoring session. To think that we each have all the tricks of the trade up our sleeves would be incredibly foolhardy, and a missed opportunity for continued learning. I value the experience I have had personally but am under no illusion that at the ripe old age of 19 I have absorbed the entirety of what the tutoring community has to offer me. There's no humility and opportunity for growth in that mentality. Jordan Forest, another tutor at Utah State University, explains the benefits of continued learning for tutors stating, "As tutors, one of our greatest benefits in observations is the opportunity to learn new skills" (2). Finding the balance between humility and self-assuredness is a challenge that tutors must be willing to address and reassess frequently in order to be successful. I believe that the most effective way to maintain our status as learners as well as teachers is to utilize peer observations for all they are worth.

Taking the time to observe new practices and techniques is worthwhile and will be exhibited through our comfort with more diverse tutoring situations. Maybe after observing other tutors I would have found a tutor who would have had a witty quip or educational comeback to share with me for my student so keen on investigating my qualifications. Or maybe, even better yet, they would have been able to laugh with me and appreciate the unpredictable nature of students and tutoring. Being receptive to learning new tricks of the trade will not only help tutors become better prepared to teach others but become better students and lifelong learners themselves.

Works Cited

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